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Reagan Botched the Daniloff Affair

When an administration collapses, quickly and completely, like a punctured balloon, as the Reagan administration has done in the Daniloff debacle, a reasonable surmise is that the administration, like a balloon, had nothing in it but air.

The trouble began not in a peripheral crevice in the bureaucracy, but in the president's presence in Santa Barbara, where the first reaction to the hostage-taking was to say that the unpleasantness should not disrupt the Big Picture. Secretary of State George Shultz soon said "there can be no question of equating" the cases of Nicholas Daniloff and the accused spy Gennadi Zakharov, and there could be no trade.

But soon came the equation, in the form of the interim trade whereby Daniloff and Zakharov were placed in the custody of officials of their respective governments. The United States thereby paid the first—probably only the first—installment of the ransom (Henry Kissinger used that word to characterize the transaction) demanded by the hostage-takers.

Sen. Richard Lugar (R-Ind.), chairman of the Foreign Relations Committee and candidate to receive the administration's Good Soldier Trophy, says, delicately, "August is a difficult month, apparently, for administration coordination." So is September, so perhaps the problem is with thinking, not coordinating.

Totalitarians specialize in making victims collaborate in their victimization. It took Mikhail Gorbachev less than two weeks to turn the U.S. ambassador in Moscow into the keeper of Daniloff, who, Shultz rightly said, remained a hostage. Reagan was jubilant when announcing this transaction. Conservatives constantly say Reagan's "instincts" are splendid, the problem is only—only!—susceptibility to bad advice. Well.

Leave aside the question of whether policy should be controlled by the instinctual mechanisms of any individual. In the Daniloff affair, Reagan's instinct has prevailed, and has been wrong. It has been identical to Carter's instinct in the Iranian hostage crisis. It has been to make the national interest hostage to the goal of easing the hostage's plight. He wanted Daniloff in more comfortable confinement.

Reagan wrote a letter to Gorbachev, dignifying the Soviet charges by denying them. Gorbachev, displaying the contempt that U.S. behavior is earning, promptly branded Reagan a liar by disregardi[illegible] Reagan's assurances.

Sen. Pat Moynihan (D-N.Y.), forme[illegible] U.N. ambassador, responding to the asse[illegible] tion that this crisis began when Zakharov was arrested, replied: "We began this chain of events 30 years ago when we started letting the Soviets fill up the U.N. Secretariat with spies, in direct violation of the Charter." The morning Moynihan said that, the lead story in The New York Times reported administration efforts to reduce cuts Congress has voted in subsidies for the United Nations. The cuts are intended to express "among other things" anger that the United Nations, where U.S taxpayers pay one-fourth of the bills, is flagrantly used by the Soviet bloc for espionage.

What must they be saying in the Kremlin, in merry disbelief? "Next, will Reagan want U.S. taxpayers to subsidize grain sales to us?" In 69 years of U.S.-Soviet relations, no U.S. president has been treated with the disdain Gorbachev has now shown toward Reagan, which is especially rude considering that Reagan does indeed want U.S. taxpayers to subsidiz[illegible] grain sales.

George Carver, a senior fellow a[illegible] Georgetown University's Center for Strategic and International Studies, says that the United States has, in effect, agreed to play by Soviet rules regarding espionage and has placed a mantle of protection over Soviet spies: "The next time the FBI catches a Soviet, the mattress mice in the State Department and the White House will be out wringing their hands and saying, 'Oh, no, we can't arrest him! We don't want another Daniloff thing; there's too much going on.'"

One of the things the administration is eager to have go on during the Daniloff affair is a "town meeting" with U.S. participants in Riga in the Soviet Union. When the interim trade was arranged, the administration wanted the Americans who had pulled out to go to Riga after all. The administration knew this would imply the respectability of the ransom payment. Several clear thinkers, including Jeane Kirkpatrick and Robert McFarlane, refused to be [illegible]ed, and stayed home.

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Two Sundays ago an undersecretary of [illegible]ate evidently thought he was being stern [illegible]hen he said the unresolved Daniloff case will "intrude itself" into all discussions with the Soviet Union. Even today, the administration cannot bring itself to say what it should have said immediately, even instinctively:

"No talks about anything, no subsidized grain sales, no credits, no cultural exchanges, no support for the United Nations, no Soviet ships in U.S. ports, no landings here by Soviet airlines, no nothing until Daniloff is released, unconditionally."

Today the deflated administration is reduced to saying that if Daniloff is not released, his case will be at the top of the agenda for the Shultz-Shevardnadze talks. Wow! That'll teach 'em. That will mean that Shultz will complain and Shevardnadze will drum his fingers and roll his eyes, and then they will proceed with business as usual, the Soviet side confirmed in its contempt.

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